



Tribal Participation **By Jolene Jacobson**

Tribal nations play an important role in interoperable communications throughout Montana. In particular, four tribes on Montana's 565-mile border with Canada have been actively participating with the Northern Tier Interoperability Project. These include the Blackfeet, Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), Fort Belknap, and Fort Peck Indian Nations. On May 26, 2004, each tribe signed letters of intent to join the Northern Tier Interoperability Consortium to set the basic framework for providing secure communication capability between federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies.

This type of tribal collaboration is precedent-setting because Indian Nations are sovereign nations, meaning, in the words of the U.S. Supreme Court, they are "domestic dependent nations," which exercise inherent sovereign authority over their members and territories. Tribal nations have the right to petition the federal government for their own Homeland Security funding. Instead, they chose to partner with the Northern Tier Interoperability Project because of mutual and critical communications interoperability needs between levels of government and across jurisdictions.

Linda Weeks, an Environmental Specialist who works with Fort Peck Tribal Emergency Response in Poplar, MT emphasized the significance of being the first tribe in Montana to sign a Memorandum of Understanding to participate on an interoperability consortium.

"That was a huge step," she said. "Now, we have much better radio coverage in our outlying areas. Our reservation consists of two million acres, so that's a lot of territory to cover," said Weeks. The Northern Tier radio system will provide advanced digital, secure voice and data communications for law enforcement interoperability across this vital border region. It also will improve homeland security by providing the means for military and civil authorities to communicate by radio.

This partnership has already yielded positive results, even though the Northern Tier project isn't complete yet. For example, in my region, the new communications site on Jette Mountain resides on tribal land, and the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes serves as the site manager. Our tribe was instrumental in assisting with all phases of the construction process to help move the project forward and to get the site built. As a result of this involvement, the CSKT has experienced dramatic improvements in our radio communications.

"I'm thankful that we've been able to participate," said Donald Bell, a patrol officer on the CSK Tribal Law and Order Police Force, located in Pablo, MT. "The coverage we now have is unbelievable. Previously, we could not communicate on the west side of the reservation, and we had no radio coverage in Arlee, MT, a town just 22 miles away from Missoula, Montana's second-largest city. The coverage footprints between the old and new sites clearly show great improvement."

Bell serves on Montana's Homeland Security Task Force and was appointed by the U.S. Attorney General to the U.S. Anti-Terrorism Advisory Council. He said it has been great participating with other law enforcement officers and DES coordinators on the Northern Tier Interoperability Project, and he has been impressed with everyone's professionalism and ability to cooperate to help improve public safety.

In addition to technical expertise, the Fort Belknap Tribal Nation has been instrumental in contributing cultural and spiritual advice. According to Janice Hawley, the Human Resources Manager for the Fort Belknap tribe, who also serves on the Northern Tier board of directors, tribal members were actively involved in performing a cultural assessment of the Mt. Royale Site. This assessment was conducted to determine if placement of the tower and radio equipment would have a detrimental impact on any of the tribes' spiritual sites on and around the mountain. Fortunately, it was determined that the communications site would not have an adverse affect, so construction could proceed.

"Tribal members were instrumental in facilitating the cultural assessment," said Hawley, and "I'm pleased that we were able to be so actively involved." In addition, Hawley points out a benefit of regular communication and participation on the Northern Tier project. "As an active participant at board meetings, our tribal law enforcement is able to readily coordinate efforts with law enforcement officers from other jurisdictions. This opportunity to network is invaluable," she said.

Nora Kennedy, Blackfeet Emergency Medical Services, also has positive things to say about their involvement with the Northern Tier. The cooperation between the Blackfeet Tribal Nation, Glacier National Park, and the Interoperability Montana Project is unprecedented in the area of mutual benefit and planning. The Divide Mountain radio com-

munications site is located on tribal lands and Glacier National Park has agreed to build it for mutual use of the Northern Tier, the Blackfeet Tribe, the Park Service and other Federal and state users.

Seven of Montana's tribal nations participate in the Interoperability Montana project across the state. Indian Nations represented in three consortia are as follows:

**Big Sky 11 Interoperability
Communications Consortium (Big Sky 11)**

- Crow Tribe
- Northern Cheyenne Tribe

**Central Montana Interoperability
Communications Consortium (CMICC)**

- Rocky Boy's Indian Nation, home to the Chippewa-Cree Tribe

**Northern Tier Interoperability
Consortium (NTIC)**

- Blackfeet Tribe
- The Flathead Indian Nation, home to the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes
- Fort Belknap Indian Nation
- Fort Peck Indian Nation

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